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ABSTRACT

The International Task Force on Literacy, a coalition of non-governmental organizations, calls on other non-governmental organizations, governments, and heads of state to join its commitment to literacy and related principles. An introductory section links mass illiteracy to poverty, structural injustice, and economic marginalization, and focuses on female literacy as an educational priority. Literacy is then defined more precisely, and subsequent sections address specific issues, including program needs for women's literacy, the concept of learner involvement as empowerment, and, more briefly, mobilization of resources, involvement of non-governmental organizations, creation of public awareness, and research and evaluation needs. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR 1990

A CALL TO ACTION
from
THE INTERNATIONAL TASK FORCE ON LITERACY

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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PREAMBLE

We, the members of the International Task Force on Literacy, represent a wide range of non-governmental organizations with an outreach to over 60 million people in nearly every corner of the world. We call upon ourselves, other NGOs, governments and Heads of State urgently to make effective commitments for literacy and principles which have been identified during our fifth meeting held in Suraj Kund—India in October, 1989.

OVERVIEW

Mass illiteracy is inextricably linked with mass poverty, structural injustice and marginalisation. Therefore, people need to be empowered as learners to get access to the education and knowledge which will enable them both to assume control over their own processes of growth, and to become active, responsible participants in a systematic process of social development.

Literacy therefore includes, but goes far beyond, the basic skills of reading and writing.

Women are the key figures in the global literacy campaign, as women and girls comprise about 70 percent of illiterate peoples. After excluding them from decision-making structures through centuries of subjugation and discrimination, today there is an urgent need to utilise their wealth of insights and talents in every sphere of social, political, and economic endeavour. To answer this need, a priority should be given to the education of girls and women in all literacy programmes. This positive discrimination will, no doubt, have an uplifting influence on the quality of education as a whole.

Conditions of mass poverty and illiteracy render people rather vulnerable to the forces of terrorism, ethnic violence and other forms of social disruption. Literacy efforts can offer benefit for all both in rural and urban settings. Therefore, education of school age children deprived of schooling and members of minority groups, often living in remote areas, should become one of the objectives of all literacy planning.

Parallel education systems both reflect and further institutionalise existing disparities. Where nonformal and education system exist, linkages must offer entry points from one to the other. Each government must allocate the necessary resources to fit this restructuring of priorities. Improving existing programme efficiency and effectiveness will help release critical resources.

Literacy, as a vital component of any educational input, should not be projected as merely a means of seeking employment or facilitating consumerism. Education should be examined in the light of its contribution to the individual's holistic growth. It should be regarded as an efficient vehicle for bringing about fundamental social changes for the creation of a peaceful and just society.

Recognizing the harmful and intolerable consequences of the current situation, we declare ourselves ready to act on the vanguard of this campaign and urge the utmost support for the cause of universal education.

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

1.0 Definition of Literacy

Literacy is defined as the set of knowledge, qualities, skills, attitudes and capacities that enable individuals to preserve self esteem by assuming both control over their own growth, and by becoming active participants in a process of social change that will lead to a more peaceful, just and harmonious society.

2.0 Women and Literacy

Women should be the central focus of all literacy programmes. The root causes underlying the present dismal status of women's education are located in the structures of patriarchy which continue to influence attitudes and behaviour towards girls and women in many societies. This injustice based on gender is often compounded by class and economic factors and has significant implications for the nature and thrust of education policy and planning.

2.1 Programme design must begin with an understanding of the specific cultural, social and economic problems faced by women.

2.2 Women's literacy programmes must necessarily include a component for sensitization and education of men in particular, and for other members of the family and society in general. Men should be prepared to accept the egalitarian situation which will come as a result of the education of women.

2.3 Every literacy effort should foster self-confidence in women.

2.4 Teacher training and material design and development, research and evaluation, learning strategies must all address the particular needs and learning difficulties faced by women and girls.

2.5 The entire range of methodology for women's literacy should be process oriented and should consciously promote dialogue between men and women and the full understanding of their equal partnership and shared responsibilities at home and in society.

2.6 Women should be taught how to co-operate to better promote the interests of women: educating their daughters, jointly abandoning practices which are to their detriment such as dowry systems and preference for the male child, training the next generation to think differently and learning many forms of economic, social and political co-operation. As the first educators of their children, mothers can substantially determine the values of each generation.

3.0 Learner Involvement as Empowerment

We begin with the assumption that all peoples can find both the direction and the capacity for development within themselves. All literacy actions must further empowerment and not increase dependency. This has many concrete implications:

3.1 Literacy instruction should foster participation in social, economic and political process as part of working together for social change.

3.2 Literacy programmes should be considered an initial stage in the development of long-term efforts to support learning and social development.

3.3 Literacy actions should promote people's awareness that education is their right and simultaneously their responsibility.

3.4 Literacy efforts should be designed to involve learners in deciding the focus, content, design and thrust of literacy acquisition.

3.5 Literacy should promote recognition of the values of one's own culture and respect for the culture of others.

3.6 Content and materials need to address local conditions and issues reflecting the diversity and range of basic learning needs.

3.7 Fostering self-realization of the individual and facilitating the individual's productive involvement in society must be the objectives of the literacy work. This alone can release the flow of hitherto hidden or suppressed energies, creativity and intellect which lead to happiness and human dignity.

3.8 A positive attitude towards learning needs to be encouraged as an essential part of the struggle for social and economic change. The power of critical and constructive thinking is an indispensable instrument for community action. The learner's own conceptions of the importance of their knowledge and actions is also significant. Literacy should not be only limited to increasing consumerism or facilitating employment.

3.9 Programmes must increase people's awareness of the magnitude of the global challenges to their survival. War, the debt crisis, terrorism, growing fundamentalism, communal violence, environmental degradation, drug and prostitution rings all pose radical threats.

Therefore, literacy should promote peace and non-confrontational problem-solving and should strengthen people's understanding of the benefits of representative government and their ability to promote and safeguard their interests.

3.10 The content must facilitate the elimination of all forms of prejudice: religious, racial, national, gender, caste, and social.

3.11 The content must promote the concept and value of peace and unity while encouraging the use of consultation as a means to resolve issues both in the family and in society as a whole.

4.0 Resource Mobilization

All possible resources must be harnessed and mobilized—conventional and non-conventional. Voluntary community efforts for literacy can provide new models for utilizing available resources. Lobbying and pressuring for diversion of scarce resources, from armament and military expenditure into educational, social and welfare sectors is another.

5.0 NGO Involvement

Voluntary, non-profit groups should mobilize all their forces to become more than ever effective means in motivating people at the grassroots to offer and seek education. They should provide for different types of formal and nonformal education of deprived groups of children, youth and adults. Establishing support activities for mothers, such as child care during working and literacy class hours, should become another type of activity offered by these groups. The degree to which their initiative and ability is respected by state and political authorities will determine their effectiveness as important partners in literacy action.

6.0 Public Awareness

Through information and mobilization activities the public should become keenly aware of the many dimensions and purposes of literacy. Furthermore, the general public should be involved in — especially at the local level—a public debate designed to mobilize general support for all kinds of literacy intiatives.

7.0 Research and Evaluation

There is very little systematic data or detailed analysis of what is happening on the ground in the literacy field; the ways and conditions in which people learn, the true nature of the nexus between gender, class, poverty and literacy. Greater financial resources should be placed at the disposal of research institutions in the developing countries. Clearly, there is an urgent need for new forms of research and imaginative ways of evaluation which will involve a far greater degree of people's involvement in both processes.

CONCLUSION

As we move into the International Literacy Year and open a Decade of Action, it is time to renew our energies, creativity and sense of determination as we join forces to make education for all a reality. We urge all committed forces to add their voice and strength to this collective resolve, believing that only through such global effort can we establish a just, equal and educated world.

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